The W.P. Whitsett
California Lecture Series
March 6, 1998

"Disney's Nature: Walt Disney and the Nature of America"

Dr. Richard White
MeClelland Professor of History
University of Washington

W.P. Whitsett Committee
Department of History
California State University, Northridge

The Twelfth Annual Lecture in the W.P. Whitsett California Lecture Series

California State University, Northridge
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Welcome

Dr. Gloria Ricci Lothrop
W. P. Whitsett Chair
California State University, Northridge

Introduction

Dr. William Deverell
California Institute of Technology

"Disney's Nature: Walt Disney and the Nature of America"

The 1998 Whitsett Lecture by

Dr. Richard White
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This twelfth lecture in the Whitsett Series is sponsored by the Whitsett Endowment, the Phi Alpha Theta National Honor Society, and the Department of History of California State University, Northridge

8:00 p.m.
Grand Salon
University Student Union

RICHARD WHITE

Richard White is the McClelland Professor of History in the University of Washington. After completing his Ph.D. at the University of Washington in 1975, he taught at Michigan State University and the University of Utah. He received outstanding teaching awards at these institutions before returning to the University of Washington in 1990.

Richard White is a very prolific "New Western" historian and author of several award winning studies on American Indians and the American West. As recent president of the Western History Association, Professor White has led a new generation of historians to explore the relationships between the traditional Turnerian frontier perspective and the regionalists with their emphasis on the West as "space—physical, cultural, economic, social, and political—in which people would create the West." From his first books and articles, Professor White has exhibited a distinct orientation that emphasizes the dynamic interaction of human societies with the environment. In his first book, *Land Use, Environment, and Social Change: The Shaping of Island Country, Washington, 1790-1940*, White offers a local case study that combines social and environmental history. In *The Roots of Dependency: Subsistence, Environment, and Social Change Among the Choctaws, Pawnees and Navajos* (1980), which received the Wheeler-Voegelin Book Prize for Ethnohistory. White characteristically rejects "the recent canonization of Indians into environmental sainthood". Instead, White provides a comparative study of three Indian societies as their economies and environment declined and they moved toward dependency. "The reciprocal influences of culture, politics, economics, and the environment" in the Indian interaction with the European powers and Americans shaped this dependency and characterizes the innovative orientation of Professor White.

Richard White has contributed significantly to the reinterpretation of the West from his first article on the westward migration of the Teton Sioux which received the Western History Association's award for the best article in western history in 1979. White characteristically placed intertribal warfare on the Plains and Sioux expansion within social and economic forces. White then produced two award-winning books, *"It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own:" A New History of the American West* (1991) which received the Western Heritage Award and *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815* (1991) which won four major awards including the Albert J. Beveridge Award of the American Historical Association and the Francis Parkman Award of the Society of American Historians and was selected as a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. The former offers the most comprehensive synthesis of the "New Western" perspective with extensive assessment of the 20th century West and the major themes of capitalism, the state and nature dynamically interacting with social and multicultural groups as Turner's frontier slips away.

White has continued to offer stimulating assessments from his essay on "Animals and Enterprise" in the *Oxford History of the American West* (1993), to his essay on "Frederick Jackson Turner and Buffalo Bill" in *The Frontier and American Culture* (1994) which examines their joint performance in Chicago in 1893 and the question of why their somewhat contradictory stories of the frontier became so dominant with illustrations from a Newberry Library exhibit. In 1995 White received the Governor's Award for *The Organic Machine: The Remaking of the Columbia River*, a brief synthesis with an ambitious objective to get readers to "think in new ways . . . about nature and its relation to human beings and human history." As a MacArthur Fellow and recipient of numerous other fellowships, White will undoubtedly offer a new and thoughtful perspective on Walt Disney.

William Paul Whitsett
1875–1965

During W. P. Whitsett's long life he achieved much in the fields of mining, irrigation, and real estate. To each he brought optimism, and impressive competence. His exciting era and area was southern California early in this century. In a practical sense the region flourished in a post-frontier period of grand designs and gigantic risks.

Whitsett was born on December 27, 1875, at Whitsett, Pennsylvania, into a family which had pioneered in coal mining and coke production in the Pennsylvania hills. His father was Ralph C. Whitsett, a doctor. His mother, Emma Ross Whitsett, was descended from Betsy Ross. They were of English, Irish, and Scottish ancestry.

Unfortunately, his father contracted tuberculosis and went to Colorado for recovery. In the following months, he, Emma, and their two daughters died of "consumption." Fortunately, this was a close family, so Paul's grandparents took care of the children who survived. Summers the boy worked on the family farm, and later he had a job in the Whitsett company store.

The family was deeply religious, as Whitsett would always be, and they hoped he might become a minister, but Paul preferred the business world. For a short time he worked in the family coal mines to earn extra money to attend Southwest State Normal School at California, Pennsylvania. The resourceful youth also sold Bibles to help pay his way. Most of all young Whitsett enjoyed being his own boss. Even that early he impressed people with his sense of timing, ability to predict future trends, and an eagerness to act on these talents.

After his graduation with a degree in business administration, he completed a commercial course at Farmington College in Ohio. Later, in Chicago, Whitsett developed skills as a coal entrepreneur. Times appeared poor for such a decision, for in 1896 the nation had not fully recovered from the Panic of 1893. In America's second city Paul and his brother Ralph founded the R. B. Whitsett Coal Company. Luck beckoned in the form of an Illinois coal strike. Whitsett bought the coal from Kentucky and got draft horses from Indiana to haul the much desired product for his fortunate customers

While W. P. Whitsett worked in Chicago he met and married a Pennsylvania socialite, Sarah Haddock, on June 14, 1899. They would have three children, Katharine, later Mrs. Wilton Still, Frank, and Paul.

Despite crises of labor and supply, which he ably handled, the next few years saw Whitsett's coal business in Kentucky, Pennsylvania, and Indiana clearly prospering. Still a young man in his late twenties who seemed a dynamo of strength, Whitsett paid heavily for overworking. Like his parents and sisters before him, he contracted tuberculosis and had to retreat to a high, dry and sunny climate. Ironically, just as his father had, he was forced to leave his young wife and children in the east. Indeed, his life was taking a serious turn, but again his luck held, for in the Southwest his greatest days and sixty more wonderful years were ahead.

Whitsett had never known real despair, and the medical odds did not conquer him now. He decided to "think healthfully," as he later recalled. Always in love with the outdoors and particularly with this spectacularly beautiful scenery in New Mexico's Rockies, he took up riding and began to improve. Meanwhile, he had sold out his Indiana coal mines for $135,000, and after paying debts had $30,000 left for investment.

ARRIVAL IN CALIFORNIA

At thirty in 1905, Whitsett made the most important move of his life. His wife's grandfather, Charles G. Haddock had moved to Los Angeles, California, some years earlier and become a volunteer booster for its climate and opportunities. Ever since the railroad had arrived in the 1870s, Los Angeles had been a "sanitarium," its fine weather, agricultural fertility, and natural beauties vaunted by eastern and western advertisers. With the influx of thousands of health seekers, land investors, retirees, and tourists, Los Angeles city doubled every decade, and by 1900 its population had reached 102,000. None of these economic and cultural potentials and the possibility of a full cure from tuberculosis were wasted on the tall, slender man who had already begun to wear his lifelong trademarks, a bow tie and a wing collar.

In southern California, Whitsett decided to develop land near Huntington Park. Now he had

been transformed into a land developer. Wisely, he chose a tract, which he named Walnut Lawn, and invested $30,000 in it. He divided his forty acres into 198 lots with 50-foot frontages and 135-foot depths. His years as a health seeker in the dry Southwest had taught Whitsett that water was the most indispensable ingredient. Therefore he irrigated Walnut Lawn. He also built and sold buyers houses cheaply, thus profitably dispensing with them all. It was most impressive salesmanship, especially because as Whitsett's personal boomlet was developing, the nation—and California—were suffering from the Panic of 1907.

FOUNDING VAN NUYS

The San Fernando Valley, where W. P. Whitsett would craft his greatest claims to fame was the site of the San Fernando Mission, founded in 1797 by California's Franciscan padres near one of the few good local water sources. In the Mexican Era of California the mission's Indian converts developed extensive farming and grazing on unusually fertile fields.

The valley developed as a cattle-raising area while northern California had its gold rush. After a severe cattle-killing drought in the early 1860s, it turned to wheat. Now as the twentieth century began water resources were about to be increased via Owens Valley. Los Angeles' rapid-transit system of the day, trolley cars, would provide transportation for a growing city whose citizens could be fed from valley acres, or could live in the San Fernando Valley and commute daily to a city job. The Los Angeles Suburban Homes Company was established by a small group of leading merchants and developers. They bought the Los Angeles Farming and Milling Company's 47,000 acres of the former wheat ranch of the two Isaacs, Messrs. Van Nuys and Lankershim. In 1911, Whitsett joined them, buying an undivided half-interest in the town-site of Van Nuys. A friend suggested he name the new town Van Nuys, and Whitsett readily agreed.

Enthusiastically, Whitsett, now 35, called his new lands among the richest and best in California, but to the inexperienced eye those acres looked like a wasteland. There were no light fixtures, water pipes, gas, or telephone facilities. Train service appeared but twice a week. Yet, Whitsett's advantage was to act now while others "were waiting for conditions to improve."

For months Whitsett planned the formal founding of Van Nuys to occur on Washington's Birthday, February 22, 1911, and the selling of its first lands. There would be a mammoth barbecue that day, with Senor Jose Romero serving the food with good old legendary Mexican California hospitality, tradition, and cuisine. A great multitude had stormed the Southern Pacific depot in downtown Los Angeles to get to Van Nuys, while roads into the valley were covered with cars. Initial sales totaled $125,935.75, representing actual cash payments of $39,606.37.

In the early days, 1911–1912, several writers commented on the interesting growth of Whitsett's Van Nuys. Warren McIntire, calling San Fernando the "Valley of Opportunity," described Van Nuys as "the story of how big men have done things in a big way and builded up a rich section from an almost unvisited and little known wheat acreage." Events moved with astonishing speed. Van Nuys boasted a post office by August 18, 1911; its first journal, the News appeared on August 24, and on December 4, a $50,000 bond issue was carried in the less than year-old town for schools; eighty votes favored it against minimal opposition. The Pacific Electric's streetcar tracks reached Van Nuys on December 18. As one might have expected in a town founded by W. P. Whitsett, the Chamber of Commerce was founded on April 20, 1912, and electric lights gleamed on July 20, followed on August 3,1912 by the first Harvest Festival, boosted by the founding father.

Reminiscing in 1932 at Van Nuys' "coming of age" at twenty-one, its founder offered an insight:

> Many years ago I originated the slogan 'The Town That was Started Right,' and have endeavored to have it lived up to always. Having been brought into existence, the care and nourishment of the self-supporting stage fell to me. Continuing the comparison with a child, we may say that in its early years the infant city, precocious and lusty as it was, required eternally vigilant care. It required nursing, a proper financial and development diet, including the feeding of productive industries fast enough to create naturally, healthy growth but not so fast as to induce community indigestion.

As all infants do, it had to be literally supported during its early years and until it could begin to toddle and then walk.

VAN NUYS COMES OF AGE

Blessed with a seemingly endless supply of ideas for improving his community, it is no surprise that Whitsett was dubbed by one California historian "San Fernando Valley's Godfather." Whitsett knew of Petaluma, California's center of poultry and eggs production north of San Francisco. He believed that its climate and soils were similar to Van Nuys' and concluded that, "instead of taking three or four years in the case of fruit, your money from the chicken ranch comes in every day."

Accordingly, he took several Van Nuys ranchers to Petaluma and convinced them what profits were possible. He had an architect develop an ideal chicken house based on the most successful ones at Petaluma. Whitsett had encouraged Swiss dairy farmers to settle there. His two young sons grew White Rose potatoes, sold them on the roadside, and won first prize for them at the State Fair in Sacramento.

W. P. Whitsett, always planning ahead, had gotten experts from Colorado to prove that Van Nuys was ideal for the crop. He succeeded in convincing the powerful Southern Pacific, until that time considered the "Octopus" of California economics and politics, to reduce its rail rate to Van Nuys, and he made up the difference between what he wanted for tourists and the price the SP would give.

To help finance this California cornucopia which was beginning to feed an emerging Los Angeles metropolis, Whitsett became a banker! He established the Bank of Van Nuys in 1922 and the Provident Building and Loan Association in 1925. He called the former "thoroughly a Van Nuys community organization." Its stock was widely owned within Van Nuys. In 1926, the bank, which then had $1,250,000 in resources, merged with the Security-First National Bank of Los Angeles. His building and loan association, of which he was first president, was called during the Depression one of the soundest in California. It catered to small farm loans.

GARDEN ACRES

Whitsett's persistent dream for one-acre farm homes in the San Fernando Valley sheds much light on his philosophy of a strong backboned individualism, earned self-respect, and healthy optimism that he believed were at the center of Americanism. He admitted readily that this was no original idea of his. Thomas Jefferson's belief in the blessings of a wholesome and moral rural life as opposed to too great urbanization had inspired many. Whitsett had adopted the ideal from his grandfather, Ralph Whitsett, who instilled a love of rural life and reverence for farming as basic to all of man's endeavors. The elder Whitsett had encouraged his coal mine employees in bad times to turn to the land for their living. As we have seen, the grandson's bank and loan company encouraged investing in small plots.

In 1932, W. P. Whitsett presented the Garden Acre Homes plan to build three hundred houses in three years. A coined of mottoes, Whitsett advanced the phrase "Better Homes for Less Money on 'Garden Acres.'" In his several visits to Europe he was impressed by peasants who worked in towns or cities and commuted to their residences where they could produce their own food and sell a little at local markets. As he put it, "I went to Germany, France, Belgium and other countries and saw their small, neat farms, carefully cared for and wonderfully productive. They seemed very happy."

He advocated lots as small as 100 by 300 feet, large enough for truck gardens in his "Valley of Content." This also reflected his deep faith in the dependable richness of California soils, a belief that had made him and Van Nuys rich in previous years. Whitsett saw, too, that workdays would soon be shortened, giving local workers more time for growing things. Here was the ideal region for his suburban garden-farms with their "food, health, a home, security, and independence"

To Whitsett, words always meant action. He formed groups of five families to carry out the crusade under his Whitsett Group Plan. He reasoned that members of these families could form "car pools" to go downtown from their neighboring homes to a common workplace, return together as cheaply as one rider could, and en route discuss the problems and methods of farming and the workplace. Whitsett was concerned that land prices were falling during the Depression and be-

lieved his plan would stop the turning of the valley into an area of shacks.

Through his practical experiences as a self-made expert on water, Whitsett was appointed as a commissioner of the board of the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power in 1924. In his new post he argued for limiting the admission of new communities to the city's water, for by the mid-twenties it was certain that the city would need even more water. His five years in this important position made him the ideal man to be appointed chairman of the newly-formed Metropolitan Water District of Southern California.

It was obvious that Los Angeles, which as a city would pass the million population mark by 1930, would have to look eastward to the Colorado River. Since that stream and its tributaries were shared by seven Southwestern states, the federal government was to be involved. In 1928, the United States' Johnson-Swing Act, of which Whitsett had been a key proponent, signaled construction, and the several independent cities of southern California, including Los Angeles, formed the Metropolitan Water District, to get abundant water and power. As Chairman of the Board, Whitsett spearheaded passage of the $220 million bond issue in 1931, in the depths of the great recession. This made possible the construction of Hoover Dam on the Colorado.

As Chairman, Whitsett was always under political pressure from vendors, contractors, and others seeking influence. He also succeeded in getting a large dam. Its vital role would be seen after Pearl Harbor as America entered World War II and southern California greatly expanded as a war industries base.

Whitsett learned to use the radio effectively to make many speeches, as earlier he had used the press. This time he sold Californians on the importance of the project. There were many grousers, some in high positions, who believed that the project was too difficult to complete, and that Los Angeles would never grow large enough to need its costly facilities.

History vindicated Whitsett. He believed that "Divine Providence opened the eyes and the minds and the souls of our people to the true vision of a great and growing future of this country." No wonder Whitsett was named "Los Angeles' Most Useful Citizen" in 1938. He retired from his history-making post on January 10, 1947, after eight reelections unanimously to the job.

ACHIEVEMENTS

Although the founder of Van Nuys lived quietly and without pomposity, he was generous in his charities. He gave plots of land to various Van Nuys churches and to the San Fernando Valley Boy Scouts, and was honorary president of the group. A building he donated let them use the money for scouting purposes and his largess helped them acquire Camp Whitsett in the Sequoia National Park vicinity. He also had a friend of his build a dam there, thus creating a lake so city boys could learn to swim in its quiet waters. He contributed $50,000 and the land to the Valley Presbyterian Hospital.

W. P. Whitsett was a member of the Christian Church, a Republican, and a Mason. He was also active in the Los Angeles Athletic Club and the Hollywood Country Club. W. P. Whitsett's life underlined emphatically his philosophy.

One day at his church he spoke briefly of his credo, that religion should always be a key factor in one's business, and he who had overcome so many health problems said, "Fear creates that which it fears. Faith may build its vision into reality." He also observed, "When the Good Lord created this earth of ours He provided a job for every man, woman, and child in it—for He intended man, made in His image, to be a co-creator with Him."

After 89 years of a full life he died on April 8, 1965. His funeral was held in the Little Church of the Flowers at Forest Lawn, Glendale.

He had seen Van Nuys grow from 250 people in 1911, to 18,000 during the Depression of the 1930s, to 57,000 in 1950. By 1965 the Valley had passed the million mark, having about five times as many people as our largest state, Alaska. A prominent avenue in that valley had been named for him.

Few human beings have such monuments. He had made converts to his opinions, back-boned by strong convictions and visions. W. P. Whitsett's great adventure set many patterns for the present and future development of southern California.

(*Condensed from W.P. Whitsett: A Biographical Sketch, written by Professor John Baur (1922–1993) of the Department of History of California State University, Northridge, and published by the Whitsett Committee, 1987. Copies may be obtained from the Whitsett Committee.*)

The W. P. Whitsett California Lecture Series was founded in 1986 as part of the Whitsett Endowment at California State University, Northridge, to honor the memory of William Paul Whitsett and his pioneering role in the history of the San Fernando Valley.

The Whitsett Lectures are designed to encourage a broader understanding and appreciation of the history, the development, and the future prospects of California and the West.

Sponsors of the lectures are the Whitsett Endowment, the CSUN History Association, Phi Alpha Theta, and the Whitsett Committee of the Department of History.

The W. P. Whitsett Lectures:

1987	Glenn Dumke, Inaugural Lecture
1988	Andrew Rolle
1989	Kevin Starr
1990	William Goetzman
1991	Doyce Nunis
1992	Martin Ridge
1993	Gloria Ricci Lothrop
1994	David Weber
1995	Richard Griswold del Castillo
1996	Donald Worster
1997	Iris Engstrand
1998	Richard White

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